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TAGS: [IS](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: A/S SILVERBERG MEETS WITH PM SINIORA

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b)

SUMMARY

1. (C) On 6/5, PM Siniora informed A/S Silverberg that LAF operations against Fatah al-Islam terrorists cornered in the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp were proceeding according to plan and that only two outcomes were acceptable: surrender to Lebanese justice, or elimination. Siniora agreed with the A/S that Lebanon and its friends should move quickly to follow up on the success of UNSCR 1757, specifically noting that Lebanon's Ministry of Justice was already "sifting" thorough candidates for both the tribunal's judges and assistant prosecutor. Concerning site selection, Siniora believed that both Cyprus and Malta presented security concerns, and implied that a site on mainland Europe would work best. With regard to finances, the Prime Minister said it would be difficult to reprogram Lebanon's already scant resources without parliamentary approval, but that he would do all he could to contribute Lebanon's fair share for the operation of the court. Finally, Siniora -- predictably -- made a very serious plea for the U.S. to move forward on Shebaa Farms, cautioning that an absence of movement on this key issue would make progress on other critical objectives exceedingly difficult. End summary.

2. (C) Prime Minister Fouad Siniora met with Assistant Secretary for International Organizations Kristen Silverberg

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and the Ambassador at his offices in the Grand Serail on the afternoon of June 5. Senior advisor and former Ambassador Mohamed Chatah, Ambassador-designate Antoine Chedid, and advisor Rola Nouraddine attended the meeting, as well as the Embassy's Public Affairs Officer, Special Assistant, and newly-arrived Pol/Econ Chief. Although still heavily-fortified, elements of LAF's elite air assault regiment which has been guarding the Prime Minister and his cabinet since last November have been reassigned to join the forces engaged at the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp outside of Tripoli. Despite this temporary reassignment of troops, the Serail palace still appears very well protected but by the Internal Security Forces (ISF) national police, not LAF.

CONSOLIDATING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF 1757

3. (C) A/S Silverberg emphasized to the Prime Minister the need to maintain the political momentum of UNSCR 1757 and

move quickly in three areas: tribunal site selection, financing, and the selection of judges. PM Siniora agreed completely with this assessment and said he has been in touch with UNSYG Ban Ki-moon twice since last Wednesday's action in the Security Council. Siniora said the UNSYG is keen to move forward with all possible speed as well, and that the Government of Lebanon intends to use whatever resources it has to help establish the tribunal.

14. (C) Concerning site selection, Siniora expressed unease over placing the tribunal in either Cyprus or Malta. He said that Syrian intelligence has numerous assets in Cyprus, while the security of establishing the court in Malta may be compromised as well, but by Libyan agents. Siniora indicated that placing the new tribunal in a secure European city would be preferable.

15. (C) Since the UN-Lebanon Special Tribunal Agreement calls for 12 Lebanese candidates to be submitted to the UN selection process for the positions of tribunal judges and assistant prosecutor, Siniora said his Ministry of Justice was already compiling lists of appropriate jurists for consideration. Interestingly, he said that well-respected Justice Choukri Sader would probably not be one of those nominated because his expertise rests with administrative, vice criminal, law. But he added that Justice Ralph Riachy, who along with Justice Sader has worked closely with OLA Chief Nicolas Michel for the past year, would be a prime judicial candidate. One of the leading candidates for the assistant prosecutor position would be the ministry's liaison with UNIIIC, Justice Joyce Tabet. PM Siniora indicated the identification and vetting process was now Minister Charles Rizk's top priority.

16. (C) Finally, Siniora acknowledged the need to identify Lebanese funding for at least part of the tribunal's initial

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budget. The Prime Minister confided that Speaker Berri's continued closure of parliament was making it difficult to reprogram funds, but he assured A/S Silverberg a way would be found, perhaps drawing on some discretionary funds built into the budget. He reiterated his government's commitment to do all in its power to quickly and smoothly establish the long-sought court, because the closer it came to reality, the more effective it would be in curbing Syria's continuing aggression toward its neighbor.

#### ARMS SMUGGLING AND BORDER SECURITY

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17. (C) A/S Silverberg asked Siniora for politically-feasible initiatives that could tighten Lebanon's still-porous border with Syria. When asked his opinion regarding a possible push to strengthen UNIFIL's mandate when it comes up for renewal in August, Siniora urged the U.S. to consider the possible consequences. Siniora said that in its present "cornered" state, Syria could conceivably view a deployment of UNIFIL troops to the eastern border as tantamount to an act of war by Lebanon. The Prime Minister maintained that the very fact the UNSYG has sent a "border assessment mission" to Lebanon is, at least for now, sufficient warning to Syria to conform to international norms. When the Ambassador pointed out that recent cross-border weapons smuggling by Syria was actually worse than even a month ago, Siniora argued that it was a clear sign of Syrian desperation over the deteriorating situation of their Fatah al-Islam (FAI) proxies in the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp. The Prime Minister counseled patience and urged the U.S. to allow the UN assessment team to make its report, as well as the release of the forthcoming 1701 report in the Security Council. Siniora made it clear he wanted only a simple UNIFIL renewal in August, not an expansion of the 1701 mandate.

18. (C) Concerning the UN assessment team, the Ambassador

noted they had not put in a stellar performance in front of the international donor border security sub-group meeting last week when they first arrived in Lebanon. In response, Siniora and his senior advisor, Mohamed Chatah, said they would shortly be meeting with the UN team, and would express unambiguously their desire that the team focus on issues that could lead to 1701 violations, namely, the passage of heavy weapons across Lebanon's eastern border.

¶9. (C) According to Siniora, not only would a precipitous effort to expand UNIFIL's mandate to encompass the Syrian border not give enough time to allow the 1701 process and the UN assessment team to do its work, it might also backfire in that there may not be enough votes in the Security Council to gain passage. In that case, the success of UNSCR 1757 could be mitigated. Chatah interjected they would revisit the issue in a few weeks time: following the 1701 progress report, the findings of the border assessment team, and resolution of the situation in Nahr al-Barid (and related Syrian reactions). In essence, by postponing a change to UNIFIL's mandate, Siniora was asking the U.S. not to give Syria an excuse to "lash out."

¶10. (C) Perhaps to counter-balance his caution regarding UNIFIL's mandate, the Prime Minister stated that the German-led Northern Border Pilot Project was progressing "very well," with full participation by the applicable LAF, ISF and Customs units. With any luck, he believed the project would prove itself and be expanded along the entire 325-km length of Lebanon's frontier.

#### LAF OPERATIONS AT NAHR AL-BARID

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¶11. (C) PM Siniora conveyed confidence and satisfaction with LAF's performance at Nahr al-Barid. He proudly claimed that almost no Palestinian civilians had been injured in the operation thus far, and using a tactical map to illustrate, showed how LAF forces were exercising restraint and care to "surgically" attack FAI extremists, while avoiding those camp areas where "up to 3,000 refugees" still remained. Siniora also revealed that, if at all possible, the LAF did not intend to enter the "old camp," but would concentrate on "reducing" militant positions in the less cluttered newer areas. And in order to conserve the general goodwill the Lebanese public was now demonstrating, Siniora indicated he was striving to keep LAF casualties as low as tactically

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possible.

¶12. (C) With regard to reported recent fighting in the Ain al Helweh refugee camp, located in the southern city of Sidon, Siniora said it was still localized and his government was working closely with mainstream PLO leadership to contain the sporadic firefights. He explained the fighting was one of the many legacies of the Syrian occupation, when they consciously divided the Palestinian refugee community, with the result being numerous sub-groups that were difficult to control. Siniora argued that besides increased prestige for the army and the democratic government, one of the best developments from the recent fighting was a clear sense in the Palestinian community to begin to re-evaluate their previous laissez-faire attitude toward armed Palestinian groups in the camps. Siniora indicated that once the crisis was past, he would engage with responsible Palestinian leadership to solve the problem of illegal arms in the camps once and for all.

#### SHEBAA FARMS...AND ITS CONSEQUENCES, ACCORDING TO SINIORA

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¶13. (C) Turning somber, PM Siniora informed A/S Silverberg he now believed that "certain indications" concerning Shebaa Farms given at the end of last summer's conflict "had not

been kept, nor would be." As he has with numerous visiting senior U.S. officials, Siniora explained that unless movement on Shebaa occurred soon, it would be "very difficult, if not impossible" to achieve full implementation of UNSCR 1701, as well as the highly beneficial effects of GOL's 7 Point plan, with its eventual promise of normalized relations with Israel under the terms of the 1949 Armistice Agreement.

¶14. (C) Stating that "the promise of last July has not been kept," Siniora said that only the transfer of Shebaa to UN custodianship would remove the last effective argument that Hizballah uses to maintain its arms. The Prime Minister agreed with the A/S that Hizballah would probably raise other claims, but countered that any such claims would be hollow and ineffective. But more importantly in Siniora's view, not only would it disarm Hizballah, but it would demonstrate to the Arab world that diplomacy works. This in turn would empower Arab moderates and help turn the tide against the senselessly destructive policies of Arab extremists. He argued that so much is at stake, he finds it almost inconceivable that the West does not move forward quickly on this critical issue.

¶15. (C) In response, A/S Silverberg postulated that if Shebaa was turned over, but Hizballah still defiantly kept its arms, wouldn't the whole exercise simply empower Hizballah instead of moderates. And the worst outcome would be if the UN inadvertently gives Hizballah justification for its arms, by declaring Shebaa Lebanese in advance of any willingness by the Israelis to change the situation on the ground. But Siniora countered there was no advantage to stubbornly holding onto what he insisted was a strategically unimportant piece of land when to allow it to pass into UN control would set in motion a powerful sequence of events that would greatly strengthen moderation. Both Siniora and Mohamed Chatah urged the U.S., not to allow the process to drift through an interminable delineation process, when a clean solution was so readily available. By taking Shebaa out of the argument, Siniora concluded, a remarkably comprehensive regional solution could be attained that would deliver critical benefits to Lebanon, Israel, and the forces of moderation and stability.

¶16. (U) This cable was not cleared by A/S Silverberg prior to release.  
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